

LEGISLATIVE AND OVERSIGHT ACTIVITIES DURING THE  
115TH CONGRESS BY THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON  
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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JUNE 26, 2019.—Ordered to be printed

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Mr. ISAKSON, from the Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
submitted the following

R E P O R T

Pursuant to paragraph 8 of rule XXVI of the Standing Rules of the Senate, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs (hereinafter, "Committee") submits its report on legislative and oversight activities during the 115th Congress.

I. HEARINGS AND MEETINGS

*A. First Session (2017)*

During the First Session of the 115th Congress, the Committee held 16 hearings, including one field hearing. At the hearings, the Committee heard testimony from 111 witnesses.

Three hearings (May 17, June 15, and July 11) focused exclusively on legislation pending before the Committee. Testimony offered at these hearings covered 42 bills.

The Committee held eight business meetings.

On May 24, one measure was ordered favorably reported out of the Committee; on June 28, one measure was ordered favorably reported out of the Committee; on July 26, one measure was ordered favorably reported out of the Committee; and on November 29, one measure was ordered favorably reported out of the Committee. The Committee held three meetings to discharge nominations.

The Committee held five joint hearings with the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs in order to receive legislative presentations from veterans service organizations. These hearings were held on February 28, March 1 (two hearings), March 9, and March 22.

The Committee held one field hearing during the First Session. This hearing was held on November 21 in Columbus, Ohio.

*B. Second Session (2018)*

During the Second Session of the 115th Congress, the Committee held 14 hearings. At the hearings, the Committee heard testimony from 39 witnesses.

One hearing (August 1) focused exclusively on legislation pending before the Committee. Testimony offered at this hearing covered 15 bills.

The Committee held four business meetings to discharge nominations.

The Committee held five joint hearings with the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs in order to receive legislative presentations from veterans service organizations. These hearings were held on February 26, February 28, March 6, March 7, and March 14.

*C. List of Hearings and Meetings Held in the 115th Congress*

(1) Tuesday, January 24, 2017

Business Meeting: Meeting to Consider the Rules of Procedure of the Veterans' Affairs Committee for the 115th Congress and a Resolution Authorizing the Expenditures of the Committee for the 115th Congress

(2) Wednesday, February 1, 2017

Nomination Hearing: Pending Nomination of David J. Shulkin, M.D., to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs

(3) Tuesday, February 7, 2017

Business Meeting: Meeting to Consider the Pending Nomination of David J. Shulkin, M.D., to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs

(4) Tuesday, February 28, 2017

Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives to receive the Legislative Presentation of Disabled American Veterans

(5) Wednesday, March 1, 2017

Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives to receive the Legislative Presentation of The American Legion

(6) Wednesday, March 1, 2017

Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives to receive the Legislative Presentation of Veterans of Foreign Wars

(7) Thursday, March 9, 2017

Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives to receive the Legislative Presentation of Multiple Veterans Service Organizations (Paralyzed Veterans of America, Association of the United States Navy, AMVETS, Vietnam Veterans of America, Non Commissioned Officers Association, Gold Star Wives of America, National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, Wounded Warrior Project, and National Guard Association of the United States)

(8) Wednesday, March 15, 2017

Hearing: GAO's High Risk List and the Veterans Health Administration

(9) Wednesday, March 22, 2017

Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives to receive the Legislative Presentation of Multiple Veterans Service Organizations (Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America, Fleet Reserve Association, Air Force Sergeants Association, Military Order of the Purple Heart, American Ex-Prisoners of War Organization, Blinded Veterans Association, The Retired Enlisted Associa-

tion, Military Officers Association of America, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America)

(10) Wednesday, May 17, 2017

Legislative Hearing: Pending Health and Benefits Legislation

S. 23, Biological Implant Tracking and Veteran Safety Act of 2017

S. 112, Creating a Reliable Environment for Veterans' Dependents Act

S. 324, State Veterans Home Adult Day Health Care Improvement Act of 2017

S. 543, Performance Accountability and Contractor Transparency Act of 2017

S. 591, Military and Veteran Caregiver Services Improvement Act of 2017

S. 609, Chiropractic Care Available to All Veterans Act of 2017

S. 681, Deborah Sampson Act

S. 764, Veterans Education Priority Enrollment Act of 2017

S. 784, Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2017

S. 804, Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act

S. 899, Department of Veterans Affairs Veteran Transition Improvement Act

S. 1024, Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017

S. 1094, Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017

S. 1449, Serving our Rural Veterans Act

S. 1873, Veteran Partners' Efforts to Enhance Reintegration Act

(11) Wednesday, May 24, 2017

Business Meeting: Markup of Pending Legislation

- S. 1094 (Committee Print), Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017

(12) Wednesday, June 7, 2017

Hearing: Examining the Veterans Choice Program and the Future of Care in the Community

(13) Wednesday, June 14, 2017

Hearing: Fiscal Year 2018 Budget for Veterans' Programs and Fiscal Year 2019 Advance Appropriations Requests

(14) Thursday, June 15, 2017

Legislative Hearing: Pending Benefits Legislation

S. 75, Arla Harrell Act

S. 111, Filipino Veterans Promise Act

S. 410, Shawna Hill Post-9/11 Education Transferability Act

S. 473, Educational Development for Troops and Veterans Act of 2017

S. 758, Janey Ensminger Act of 2017

S. 798, Yellow Ribbon Improvement Act

S. 844, GI Bill Fairness Act of 2017

S. 882, a bill to provide entitlement to Post-9/11 Educational Assistance for members of the Armed Forces awarded the Purple Heart

S. 1192, Veterans TEST Accessibility Act

S. 1209, a bill to increase special pension for Medal of Honor recipients

S. 1218, Empowering Federal Employment for Veterans Act of 2017

S. 1277, Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses Act of 2017

S. \_\_\_\_, a bill to authorize a dependent to transfer Post-9/11 Educational Assistance in cases in which the dependent received entitlement from an individual who subsequently died

Discussion Draft to improve Post-9/11 Educational Assistance

(15) Wednesday, June 28, 2017

Business Meeting: Markup of Pending Legislation

- S. 1024 (Committee Print), Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017

(16) Tuesday, July 11, 2017

Legislative Hearing: Pending Health Care Legislation

S. 115, Veterans Transplant Coverage Act

S. 426, Grow Our Own Directive: Physician Assistant Employment and Education Act of 2017

S. 683, Keeping Our Commitment to Disabled Veterans Act of 2017

S. 833, Servicemembers and Veterans Empowerment and Support Act of 2017

S. 946, Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act

S. 1153, Veterans ACCESS Act

S. 1261, Veterans Emergency Room Relief Act

S. 1266, Enhancing Veteran Care Act

S. 1279, Veterans Health Administration Reform Act of 2017

S. 1325, Better Workforce for Veterans Act

S. \_\_\_\_, Discussion Draft, The Veterans Choice Act of 2017

S. \_\_\_\_, Discussion Draft, Improving Veterans Access to Community Care Act of 2017

S. 1550, The Department of Veterans Affairs Quality Employment Act of 2017

(17) Wednesday, July 19, 2017

Nomination Hearing: Pending Nominations

Thomas G. Bowman, of Florida, to be Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Brooks D. Tucker, of Maryland, to be an Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs (Congressional and Legislative Affairs)

James Byrne, of Virginia, to be General Counsel, Department of Veterans Affairs

Michael P. Allen, of Florida, to be a Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims

Amanda L. Meredith, of Virginia, to be a Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims

Joseph L. Toth, of Wisconsin, to be a Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims

(18) Thursday, July 20, 2017

Business Meeting: Meeting to Consider Pending Nominations

- Thomas G. Bowman, of Florida, to be Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs

- Brooks D. Tucker, of Maryland, to be an Assistant Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs (Congressional and Legislative Affairs)
- James Byrne, of Virginia, to be General Counsel, Department of Veterans Affairs
- Michael P. Allen, of Florida, to be a Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims
- Amanda L. Meredith, of Virginia, to be a Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims
- Joseph L. Toth, of Wisconsin, to be a Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims
- (19) Wednesday, July 26, 2017  
Business Meeting: Markup of Pending Legislation
- S. 1598, Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017
- (20) Wednesday, September 27, 2017  
Hearing: #BeThere: What More Can Be Done to Prevent Veteran Suicide?
- (21) Wednesday, October 4, 2017  
Nomination Hearing: Pending Nominations
  - Melissa Sue Glynn, of the District of Columbia, to be Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Enterprise Integration
  - Cheryl Mason, of Virginia, to be Chairman of the Board of Veterans' Appeals
  - Randy Reeves, of Mississippi, to be Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Memorial Affairs
- (22) Wednesday, October 25, 2017  
Business Meeting: Meeting to Consider Pending Nominations
  - Melissa Sue Glynn, of the District of Columbia, to be Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Enterprise Integration
  - Cheryl Mason, of Virginia, to be Chairman of the Board of Veterans' Appeals
  - Randy Reeves, of Mississippi, to be Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Memorial Affairs
- (23) Tuesday, November 21, 2017  
Field Hearing: The State of VA Services in Ohio
- (24) Wednesday, November 29, 2017  
Business Meeting: Markup of Pending Legislation
- S. \_\_\_\_, Caring for our Veterans Act of 2017 (Committee Print)
- (25) Wednesday, January 17, 2018  
Hearing: The State of the VA: A Progress Report on Implementing 2017 VA Reform Legislation
- (26) Tuesday, February 27, 2018  
Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives to receive the Legislative Presentation of the Disabled American Veterans
- (27) Wednesday, February 28, 2018  
Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives to receive the Legislative Presentation of The American Legion
- (28) Tuesday, March 6, 2018  
Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives to receive the Legislative Presentation of Multiple Veterans Service Organizations (Paralyzed Veterans of America, AMVETS, Vietnam Veterans of America, American Ex-Prisoners of War, Iraq and Afghanistan

Veterans of American, Association of the United States Navy, Wounded Warrior Project, National Guard Association of the United States, Non Commissioned Officers Association)

(29) Wednesday, March 7, 2018

Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives to receive the Legislative Presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars

(30) Wednesday, March 14, 2018

Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives to receive the Legislative Presentation of Multiple Veterans Service Organizations (Air Force Sergeants Associations, Blinded Veterans Association, Fleet Reserve Association, Gold Star Wives of America, Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America, Military Officers Association of America, Military Order of the Purple Heart, National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, The Retired Enlisted Association)

(31) Wednesday, March 21, 2018

Hearing: Fiscal Year 2019 Budget for Veterans' Programs and Fiscal Year 2020 Advance Appropriations Requests

(32) Wednesday, April 11, 2018

Nomination Hearing: Pending Nominations

Paul Lawrence, of Virginia, to be Under Secretary for Benefits, Department of Veterans Affairs

Joseph Falvey, of Michigan, to be a Judge of the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims

(33) Wednesday, April 18, 2018

Business Meeting: Meeting to Consider Pending Nominations

- Paul Lawrence, of Virginia, to be Under Secretary for Benefits, Department of Veterans Affairs

- Joseph Falvey, of Michigan, to be a Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims

(34) Wednesday, June 13, 2018

Nomination Hearing: Pending Nomination

John Lowry, III, of Illinois, to be Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training

(35) Tuesday, June 19, 2018

Business Meeting: Meeting to Consider Pending Nominations

- John Lowry, III, of Illinois, to be Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training

(36) Wednesday, June 27, 2018

Nomination Hearing: Pending Nomination

- Robert L. Wilkie, of North Carolina, to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs

(37) Tuesday, July 10, 2018

Business Meeting: Meeting to Consider Pending Nominations

- Robert L. Wilkie, of North Carolina, to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs

(38) Wednesday, August 1, 2018

Legislative Hearing: Pending Legislation

H.R. 299, Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2018

S. \_\_\_\_, Veterans Dental Care Eligibility Expansion and Enhancement Act of 2018

S. 3184, to amend title 38, United States Code, to modify the requirements for applications for construction of State home facilities to increase the maximum percentage of nonveterans allowed to be treated at such facilities, and for other purposes

Discussion Draft on Transition Assistance Reform

S. \_\_\_\_\_, VA Hiring Enhancement Act

H.R. 5418, Veterans Affairs Medical-Surgical Purchasing Stabilization Act

S. 1596, BRAVE Act of 2017

S. 2881, Mare Island Naval Cemetery Transfer Act

S. 1952, VA Financial Accountability Act of 2017

S. 1990, Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Improvement Act of 2017

S. 2485, Medal of Honor Surviving Spouses Recognition Act of 2018

S. 2748, BATTLE for Servicemembers Act

S. \_\_\_\_\_, to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a program to award grants to persons to provide and coordinate the provision of suicide prevention services for veterans transitioning from service in the Armed Forces who are at risk of suicide and for their families, and for other purposes

S. \_\_\_\_\_, Modernization of Medical Records Access for Veterans Act

S. 514, No Hero Left Untreated Act

(39) Wednesday, September 5, 2018

Nomination Hearing: Pending Nominations

Tamara Bonzanto, of New Jersey, to be Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Accountability and Whistleblower Protection

James Paul Gfrerer, of Virginia, to be Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Information and Technology

(40) Tuesday, September 18, 2018

Business Meeting: Meeting to Consider Pending Nominations

- Tamara Bonzanto, of New Jersey, to be Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Accountability and Whistleblower Protection

- James Paul Gfrerer, of Virginia, to be Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Information and Technology

(41) Wednesday, September 26, 2018

Hearing: The State of the VA: A 60-Day Report

(42) Wednesday, December 19, 2018

Joint Hearing with the House of Representatives: Tracking Transformation: VA MISSION Act Implementation

## II. LEGISLATION

### A. First Session (2017)

In the First Session, the Committee met in open session on May 24, 2017, and ordered favorably reported one piece of legislation to the full Senate.

- S. 1094 (Committee Print), Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the accountability of employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. This measure was introduced in the Senate on May 11,

2017. On May 24, 2017, the Committee ordered it to be reported favorably with an amendment in the nature of a substitute and reported the bill out of Committee without written report. The measure passed the Senate on June 6, 2017. The House passed the bill on June 13, 2017, and the bill was signed into law on June 23, 2017, as Public Law 115–41.

In the First Session, the Committee met in open session on June 28, 2017, and ordered favorably reported one piece of legislation to the full Senate.

- S. 1024 (Committee Print), Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to reform the rights and processes relating to appeals of decisions regarding claims for benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. This measure was introduced in the Senate on May 3, 2017. The Committee ordered it to be reported favorably with an amendment in the nature of a substitute on June 28, 2017. On July 10, 2017, the Committee reported the bill out of Committee with a written report, Senate Report 115–126. On August 1, 2017, the Senate passed the House companion bill, H.R. 2288, with an amendment in the nature of a substitute containing the language of S. 1024 as reported out of Committee, which was signed into law as Public Law 115–55 on August 23, 2017.

In the First Session, the Committee met in open session on July 26, 2017, and ordered favorably reported one piece of legislation to the full Senate.

- S. 1598, Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to make certain improvements in the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. This measure was introduced on July 20, 2017. The Committee ordered it to be reported favorably without amendment on July 26, 2017. On August 2, 2017, the Committee reported the bill out of Committee without written report. On August 2, 2017, the Senate passed the House companion bill, H.R. 3218, which was signed into law as Public Law 115–48 on August 16, 2017.

In the First Session, the Committee met in open session on November 29, 2017, and ordered favorably reported one piece of legislation to the full Senate.

- S. 2193, Caring for our Veterans Act of 2017, an original bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve health care for veterans, and for other purposes. This measure was introduced in the Senate on December 5, 2017. On December 5, 2017, the Committee reported the bill out of Committee without written report. The written report, Senate Report 115–212, was filed on March 7, 2018.

In addition, during the First Session, the Committee discharged by unanimous consent numerous pieces of legislation, as follows:

- H.R. 609, a bill to designate the Department of Veterans Affairs health care center in Center Township, Butler County, Pennsylvania, as the Abie Abraham VA Clinic, was discharged by the Committee on February 17, 2017, by unanimous consent and



passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–9 on March 13, 2017.

- H.R. 1362, a bill to name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Pago Pago, American Samoa, the Faleomavaega Eni Fa’aua’a Hunkin VA Clinic, was discharged by the Committee on March 15, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–16 on March 31, 2017.

- S. 544, a bill to amend the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 to modify the termination date for the Veterans Choice Program, and for other purposes, was discharged by the Committee on April 3, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It passed the House on April 5, 2017, and was signed into law as Public Law 115–26 on April 19, 2017.

- S. 12, the Increasing the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability to Veterans Act of 2017, was discharged by the Committee on May 25, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day with an amendment.

- S. 114, the Department of Veterans Affairs Bonus Transparency Act, was discharged by the Committee on May 25, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day. This bill was later used by the House as the legislative vehicle for the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, which was signed into law as Public Law 115–46 on August 12, 2017.

- H.R. 2288, the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017, was discharged by the Committee on August 1, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day with an amendment in the nature of a substitute. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–55 on August 23, 2017.

- S. 1282, a bill to redesignate certain clinics of the Department of Veterans Affairs located in Montana, was discharged by the Committee on August 2, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day with an amendment. It was signed into law on as Public Law 115–181 on June 5, 2018.

- S. 1165, a bill to designate the medical center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Huntington, West Virginia, as the Hershel “Woody” Williams VA Medical Center, was discharged by the Committee on September 7, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment.

- H.R. 1329, the Veterans’ Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2017, was discharged by the Committee on October 25, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law on November 2, 2017 as Public Law 115–75.

- S. 324, the State Veterans Home Adult Day Health Care Improvement Act of 2017, was discharged by the Committee on November 9, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day with an amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–159 on March 27, 2018.

- S. 1153, the Veterans ACCESS Act, was discharged by the Committee on November 9, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment.

- S. 1266, the Enhancing Veteran Care Act, was discharged by the Committee on November 9, 2017, by unanimous consent and

passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law on December 20, 2017 and became Public Law 115–95.

- H.R. 1545, the VA Prescription Data Accountability Act 2017, was discharged by the Committee on November 15, 2017, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law on November 21, 2017 as Public Law 115–86.

During the First Session, the Committee also advanced the following bills without having the bills referred to Committee:

- H.R. 2210, a bill to designate the community living center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Butler Township, Butler County, Pennsylvania, as the Sergeant Joseph George Kusick VA Community Living Center, passed the Senate by unanimous consent on August 1, 2017, without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–47 on August 16, 2017.

- H.R. 3218, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, passed the Senate by unanimous consent on August 2, 2017, without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–48 on August 16, 2017.

- H.R. 3819, the Department of Veterans Affairs Expiring Authorities Act of 2017, passed the Senate by unanimous consent on September 27, 2017, without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–62 on September 29, 2017.

- H.R. 3949, the Veterans Apprenticeship and Labor Opportunity Reform (VALOR Act), passed the Senate by unanimous consent on November 15, 2017. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–89 on November 21, 2017.

During the First Session, the Committee also incorporated provisions within the Committee’s jurisdiction into broader legislation.

#### *B. Second Session (2018)*

During the Second Session, the Committee discharged numerous bills by unanimous consent, as follows:

- S. 925, the VETS Act of 2017, was discharged by the Committee on January 3, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day with an amendment.

- S. 1873, the Veteran PEER Act, was discharged by the Committee on January 25, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate by voice vote the same day with an amendment.

- S. 2246, a bill to designate the health care center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Tallahassee, Florida, as the Sergeant Ernest I. “Boots” Thomas VA Clinic, and for other purposes, was discharged by the Committee on February 14, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–193 on June 25, 2018.

- S. 946, the Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2018, was discharged by the Committee on February 15, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day with an amendment.

- H.R. 3122, the Veterans Care Financial Protection Act of 2017, was discharged by the Committee on February 15, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amend-

ment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–131 on March 9, 2018.

- H.R. 1725, a bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to submit certain reports relating to medical evidence submitted in support of claims for benefits under the laws administered by the Secretary, was discharged by the Committee on February 15, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–130 on March 9, 2018.

- H.R. 3656, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for a consistent eligibility date for provision of Department of Veterans Affairs memorial headstones and markers for eligible spouses and dependent children of veterans whose remains are unavailable, was discharged by the Committee on March 1, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–136 on March 16, 2018.

- S. 2248, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide certain burial benefits for spouses and children of veterans who are buried in tribal cemeteries, and for other purposes, was discharged by the Committee on March 1, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. This bill was later used by the House as the legislative vehicle for the Veterans Benefits and Transition Act of 2018, which was passed by the Senate on December 19, 2018 and signed into law as Public Law 115–407 on December 31, 2018.

- S. 899, the Veterans Providing Health care Transition Improvement Act, was discharged by the Committee on March 20, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–238 on September 7, 2018.

- S. 2372, the Veterans Cemetery Benefit Correction Act, was discharged by the Committee on March 1, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. This bill was later used by the House as the legislative vehicle for the John S. McCain III, Daniel K. Akaka, and Samuel R. Johnson VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 or VA MISSION Act, which was passed by the Senate on May 23, 2018 and signed into law as Public Law 115–182 on June 6, 2018.

- H.R. 2772, the SEA Act of 2018, was discharged by the Committee on May 16, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day with an amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–188 on June 21, 2018.

- H.R. 3562, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to furnish assistance for adaptations of residences of veterans in rehabilitation programs under chapter 31 of such title, and for other purposes, was discharged by the Committee on May 16, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–177 on June 1, 2018.

- H.R. 3663, a bill to designate the medical center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Huntington, West Virginia, as the Hershel “Woody” Williams VA Medical Center, was discharged by

the Committee on May 24, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–183 on June 15, 2018.

- S. Res 551, a resolution expressing support for the designation of the week of June 18 through June 22, 2018, as National GI Bill Commemoration Week, was discharged by the Committee on June 21, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment.

- H.R. 4958, Veterans’ Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2018, was discharged by the Committee on September 25, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–258 on October 9, 2018.

- H.R. 3946, a bill to name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Statesboro, Georgia, the Ray Hendrix Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic, was discharged by the Committee on November 27, 2018 by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day with an amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–315 on December 14, 2018.

- H.R. 1162, No Hero Left Untreated Act, was discharged by the Committee on December 19, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–339 on December 21, 2018.

- S. 3444, a bill to designate the community-based outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Lake Charles, Louisiana, the “Douglas Fournet Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic,” was discharged by the Committee on December 18, 2018, by unanimous consent and passed the Senate the same day with an amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–421 on January 3, 2019.

During the Second Session, the Committee advanced the following bills without having the bills referred to Committee:

- H.R. 4533, a bill to designate the health care system of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Lexington, Kentucky as the “Lexington VA Health Care System” and to make other designations, passed the Senate by unanimous consent on February 15, 2018, without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–132 on March 9, 2018.

- H.R. 4910, the Veterans Cemetery Benefit Correction Act, passed the Senate by unanimous consent on May 24, 2018, without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–184 on June 15, 2018.

- H.R. 2147, the Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2018, passed the Senate by unanimous consent on August 22, 2018, without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–240 on September 17, 2018.

- S. 3479, the Department of Veterans Affairs Expiring Authorities Act of 2018, passed the Senate on September 18, 2018, without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–251 on September 29, 2018.

- S. 3777, the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act of 2018, passed the Senate on December 18, 2018, without amendment. It was signed into law as Public Law 115–422 on January 3, 2019.

During the Second Session, the Committee also incorporated provisions within the Committee's jurisdiction into broader legislation.

### *C. Reports*

S. 1024, the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017. Senate Report 115–126.

S. 2193, the Caring for our Veterans Act of 2017. Senate Report 115–212.

### *D. Public Laws*

#### *Senate Vehicle*

S. 544, a bill to amend the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 to modify the termination date for the Veterans Choice Program, and for other purposes, is Public Law 115–26.

S. 1094, Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017, is Public Law 115–41.

S. 114, VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, is Public Law 115–46.

S. 1266, Enhancing Veteran Care Act, is Public Law 115–95.

S. 324, State Veterans Home Adult Day Health Care Improvement Act of 2017, is Public Law 115–159.

S. 1282, a bill to redesignate certain clinics of the Department of Veterans Affairs located in Montana, is Public Law 115–181.

S. 2372, the John S. McCain III, Daniel K. Akaka, and Samuel R. Johnson VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018, is Public Law 115–182.

S. 2246, a bill to designate the health care center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Tallahassee, Florida, as the Sergeant Ernest I. “Boots” Thomas VA Clinic, and for other purposes, is Public Law 115–193.

S. 899, the Veterans Providing Health care Transition Improvement Act, is Public Law 115–238.

S. 3479, the Department of Veterans Affairs Expiring Authorities Act of 2018, is Public Law 115–251.

S. 2248, the Veterans Benefits and Transition Act of 2018, is Public Law 115–407.

S. 3444, a bill to designate the community-based outpatient clinic of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Lake Charles, Louisiana, the “Douglas Fournet Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic,” is Public Law 115–421.

S. 3777, the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act of 2018, is Public Law 115–422.

#### *House Vehicle*

H.R. 609, a bill to designate the Department of Veterans Affairs health care center in Center Township, Butler County, Pennsylvania, as the Abie Abraham VA Clinic, is Public Law 115–9.

H.R. 1362, a bill to name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Pago Pago, American Samoa, the Faleomavaega Eni Fa’aua’a Hunkin VA Clinic, is Public Law 115–16.

H.R. 2210, a bill to designate the community living center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Butler Township, Butler County,

Pennsylvania, as the Sergeant Joseph George Kusick VA Community Living Center, is Public Law 115–47.

H.R. 3218, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017, is Public Law 115–48.

H.R. 2288, the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017, is Public Law 115–55.

H.R. 3819, the Department of Veterans Affairs Expiring Authorities Act of 2017, is Public Law 115–62.

H.R. 1329, the Veterans’ Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2017, is Public Law 115–75.

H.R. 1545, the VA Prescription Data Accountability Act 2017, is Public Law 115–86.

H.R. 3949, the VALOR Act, is Public Law 115–89.

H.R. 1725, the Quicker Veterans Benefits Delivery Act of 2017, is Public Law 115–130.

H.R. 3122, the Veterans Care Financial Protection Act of 2017, is Public Law 115–131.

H.R. 4533, a bill to designate the health care system of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Lexington, Kentucky as the “Lexington VA Health Care System” and to make other designations, is Public Law 115–132.

H.R. 3656, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for a consistent eligibility date for provision of Department of Veterans Affairs memorial headstones and markers for eligible spouses and dependent children of veterans whose remains are unavailable, is Public Law 115–136.

H.R. 3562, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to furnish assistance for adaptations of residences of veterans in rehabilitation programs under chapter 31 of such title, and for other purposes, is Public Law 115–177.

H.R. 3663, a bill to designate the medical center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Huntington, West Virginia, as the Hershel “Woody” Williams VA Medical Center, is Public Law 115–183.

H.R. 4910, the Veterans Cemetery Benefit Correction Act, is Public Law 115–184.

H.R. 1900, National Veterans Memorial and Museum Act, is Public Law 115–186.

H.R. 2772, the Department of Veterans Affairs Senior Executive Accountability Act of 2018, is Public Law 115–188.

H.R. 2147, the Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2018, is Public Law 115–240.

H.R. 4958, the Veterans’ Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2018, is Public Law 115–258.

H.R. 3946, a bill to name the Department of Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic in Statesboro, Georgia, the Ray Hendrix Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic, is Public Law 115–315.

H.R. 1162, the No Hero Left Untreated Act, is Public Law 115–339.

### III. OVERSIGHT

In accordance with its mandate, the Committee engaged in oversight of VA health care facilities, VA regional offices, VA construc-

tion sites, homeless program facilities, educational institutions, military facilities, employment program facilities, other entities within the Committee's jurisdiction, and entities that coordinate with VA in serving veterans. Summaries of various oversight activities follow.

*A. First Session (2017)*

On April 14, 2017, Committee majority staff visited VA's National Work Queue command center at a VA facility in Washington, DC. The oversight visit included a tour of the facility, a briefing on distribution of work at each stage of the claims process, a demonstration of the program used to create the rules for routing work to regional offices, and a demonstration of reporting tools available to the National Work Queue staff and to leadership at the regional offices.

On April 18, 2017, Committee majority staff visited the Sheridan VA Medical Center in Sheridan, Wyoming. The oversight visit included a meeting with the executive leadership team, round tables with clinic schedulers and business office staff, a discussion with VA primary care doctors, and a tour of the facility.

On April 20, 2017, Committee majority and minority staff visited VA's National Center for Homelessness Among Veterans in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They met with Center leadership, received an overview of the Center, and a briefing from staff on ongoing research. Staff also visited the Corporal Michael J. Crescenz Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center. They met with the medical center's leadership and received briefings on non-VA care, behavioral health, opioid treatment, and emergency department care. Staff toured the facility and visited the facility's scheduling call center.

On April 21, 2017, Committee majority staff visited the VA Medical Center in Cheyenne, Wyoming. They met with the director of the medical center and staff from Veterans Integrated Service Network 19 to discuss concerns about the Veterans Choice Program.

On April 25, 2017, Committee majority staff visited the Denver VA Medical Center replacement facility.

On August 14, 2017, Committee minority staff visited the East Los Angeles Vet Center, East Los Angeles Community-Based Outpatient Clinic, and Culver City Vet Center. Staff met with leadership at each facility and received an overview of their operations and relationship with other veterans' providers in greater Los Angeles. Staff also received a tour of the facilities.

On August 15, 2017, Committee minority staff visited the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center. Staff met with leadership and received an overview of the medical center, ongoing construction projects, and progress in implementing the draft master plan. Staff also received a tour of the campus to include the various enhanced use lease housing projects.

On August 16, 2017, Committee majority and minority staff visited the San Francisco VA Medical Center. They met with leadership and received an overview of the medical center, research program, and ongoing construction projects. Staff also received a tour of the facility.

On August 17, 2017, Committee majority and minority staff visited the Palo Alto Health Care System. Staff met with leadership

at the Palo Alto Division located in Palo Alto, California. They received an overview of the health care system and its capital portfolio and a tour of the campus. Staff traveled to the Livermore Division in Livermore, California. They received a briefing on the Livermore realignment construction project and toured the current facilities. Staff then traveled to the Menlo Park Division in Menlo Park, California, and received a tour of the welcome center, service dog training program, and housing serving homeless and at-risk veterans.

On August 20–23, 2017, Committee minority staff visited VA medical facilities in Montana. Staff received a tour of the Fort Harrison VA Medical Center and participated in a meeting with VA Montana senior leadership, the Ranking Member, and Secretary of Veterans Affairs regarding the priorities and challenges facing the VA Montana Health Care System. Staff also met with non-VA medical providers in Montana, and toured and met with personnel at the Missoula and Kalispell Community Based Outpatient Clinics.

#### *B. Second Session (2018)*

On February 20–21, 2018, Committee majority staff visited the Georgia National Cemetery in Canton, Georgia. They received a briefing from cemetery leadership and toured the cemetery. Staff also visited the VA Regional Office in Atlanta, Georgia. Staff met with leadership, employees, and toured the facility. Committee majority staff also visited the Atlanta VA Medical Center, toured the medical center, and met with Veterans Integrated Services Network and VA medical center leadership. Committee majority and minority staff visited the Veterans Crisis Line, received a briefing from leadership and toured the call center.

On April 12, 2018, Committee majority and minority staff visited the Board of Veterans Appeals. Staff received a demonstration of a web tool that allows veterans to check the status of their benefits claims appeals online. Staff also toured the facility and met with Board leadership about emerging issues and implementation of the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017.

On April 13, 2018, Committee majority staff visited VA's National Work Queue. Staff met with leadership, received a briefing on National Work Queue functions, and toured the facility.

On May 22–25, 2018, Committee majority and minority staff attended the Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee (VRHAC) Meeting, held in Biloxi, Mississippi, from May 23 to May 24, at the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System. Staff attended VRHAC meetings and gave a brief presentation on the VA MISSION Act. Staff also shadowed committee members on their tours of the facility and adjacent Keesler AFB Oncology and Cardiac Centers.

On June 21, 2018, Committee minority staff visited VA's National Work Queue to conduct oversight of its operations.

On July 8–13, 2018, Committee minority staff participated in listening sessions with veterans, community providers and VA personnel regarding implementation of the VA MISSION Act in Billings, Bozeman, Missoula and Great Falls, Montana.

On July 19, 2018, Committee majority and minority staff visited the North Texas Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Health Care System in Dallas, Texas. The focus of the oversight was an update on the facility's operations as the second largest VHA sys-



tem as well as its construction program, and a brief by Rehabilitation Counseling Service regional leadership. The visit included a tour of the facility and a chance to meet facility staff and patients.

On July 20, 2018, Committee majority and minority staff visited the soon-to-be-replaced Denver VA Medical Center. Staff received a tour of the facility, focused on the services that will remain on-site for the near term as other services are transferred to the newly opened facility in Aurora, Colorado as well as understanding the proposed plan for the disposition of the property after all VHA services are transferred. Staff also received a tour of the new VHA facility in Aurora, Colorado.

On July 21, 2018, Committee majority and minority staff attended the ceremony commemorating the opening of the new VHA facility in Aurora, Colorado.

On July 24, 2018, Committee majority and minority staff participated in the Women Veterans Information Fair at the Veterans of Foreign War's National Convention in Kansas City, Missouri.

On October 16, 2018, Committee minority staff visited the Creating Options for Veterans' Expedited Recovery (COVER) Commission meeting that was open to the public. The topics included discussion of available mental health care and complimentary and integrative health services at the Palo Alto Health Care System (PAHCS). After the Commission meeting, minority staff met with the Deputy Chief of Staff for Mental Health Operations, the Chief of Recreation Therapy, and the Suicide Prevention Coordinator to discuss available services and best practices. The visit also included a tour of the Polytrauma Transitional Rehabilitation Program (PTRP) and a meeting with the leadership of the PTRP leadership.

On October 17, 2018, Committee minority staff attended the second day of the COVER Commission meeting at the Menlo Park Division of the PAHCS, discussing topics relating to data availability and VA PTSD research. The visit also included a brief interview with a social worker at the Next Steps Veterans Resource Center, which assists veterans through grants administered by Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grant. The Committee minority staff also met with the leadership of and toured the Women's Trauma Recovery Program and briefly toured the Men's Trauma Recovery Program. After visiting the Menlo Park Division, staff visited the Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno. The visit included a tour as well as a meeting with cemetery leadership.

On October 18, 2018, Committee minority staff visited the Oakland Regional Benefit Office (RO). The visit included a meeting with the acting director and leadership of the vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E) and SSD programs. The head of the union led a tour of the facility, highlighting the different phases a claim goes through before being sent back to the veteran. After visiting the Oakland RO, the minority staff traveled to Swords to Ploughshares in Oakland and met with the Legislative Director and others to discuss homeless veteran issues and education and employment.

On October 22, 2018, Committee majority and minority staff traveled to Shepherdstown, West Virginia, to conduct oversight and learn about the White House veterans hotline call center. They met

with the chief veterans experience officer and the director of operations for the White House hotline. The visit included hotline metrics, how calls are handled, call center agent training, funding, policies in place to deal with harassment, and backup systems. During the visit, staff were able to tour the facility and sit in with a call center agent while they handled calls from veterans.

On October 24–26, 2018, Committee majority staff visited the Boston, Massachusetts Vet Center. They toured the facility and received a briefing from leadership. Staff also visited the Jamaica Plain VA Medical Center in Boston. They met with VA medical center leadership and staff on issues related to mental health, homelessness, and the Million Veteran Program. In addition, Committee majority staff visited non-profits that partner with VA in assisting homeless veterans and providing mental health care to veterans and their families.

#### IV. NOMINATIONS

Name and Position	Date of Nomination	Date of Hearing	Date Reported	Date Confirmed
First Session				
David J. Shulkin, M.D. .... Secretary of Veterans Affairs	1/20/2017	2/1/2017	2/7/2017	2/13/2017
Thomas G. Bowman .... Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs	6/26/2017	7/19/2017	7/20/2017	8/3/2017
Brooks D. Tucker .... Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Congressional and Legislative Affairs	5/16/2017	7/19/2017	7/20/2017	8/3/2017
James Byrne .... General Counsel, Department of Veterans Affairs	6/26/2017	7/19/2017	7/20/2017	8/3/2017
Michael P. Allen .... Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims	6/7/2017	7/19/2017	7/20/2017	8/3/2017
Amanda L. Meredith .... Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims	6/7/2017	7/19/2017	7/20/2017	8/3/2017
Joseph L. Toth .... Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims	6/7/2017	7/19/2017	7/20/2017	8/3/2017
Melissa Sue Glynn .... Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Enterprise Integration	8/2/2017	10/4/2017	10/25/2017	11/8/2017
Cheryl Mason .... Chairman of the Board of Veterans' Appeals	9/5/2017	10/4/2017	10/25/2017	11/8/2017
Randy Reeves .... Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Memorial Affairs	9/6/2017	10/4/2017	10/25/2017	11/8/2017
Jon J. Rychalski .... Chief Financial Officer, Department of Veterans Affairs	10/16/2017	—	—	12/21/2017
Second Session				
Joseph L. Falvey .... Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims	01/24/2018	04/11/2018	04/18/2018	04/26/2018
Ronny L. Jackson .... Secretary of Veterans Affairs	03/20/2018	—	—	—
Paul R. Lawrence .... Under Secretary for Benefits, Department of Veterans Affairs	02/27/2018	04/11/2018	04/18/2018	04/26/2018
John Lowry III .... Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training	04/26/2018	06/13/2018	06/19/2018	—
Robert L. Wilkie ....	06/20/2018	06/27/2018	07/10/2018	07/23/2018

Name and Position	Date of Nomination	Date of Hearing	Date Reported	Date Confirmed
Secretary of Veterans Affairs Tamara Bonzanto .....	07/24/2018	09/05/2018	09/18/2018	01/02/2019
Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Accountability and Whistleblower Protection James Paul Gfrerer .....	07/31/2018	09/05/2018	09/18/2018	01/02/2019
Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Information and Technology				

## V. BUDGET FOR VETERANS PROGRAMS

### A. First Session (2017)

Pursuant to the requirements of section 301(d) of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974, Chairman Isakson of the Committee submitted a letter to the Budget Committee reflecting the Chairman's Views and Estimates on the Administration's proposed fiscal year 2018 budget for veterans' programs. The letter submitted is printed below in its entirety:

JOHNNY ISAKSON, GEORGIA  
 CHAIRMAN  
 JERRY MORAN, KANSAS  
 JOHN BOOZMAN, ARKANSAS  
 DEAN HELLER, NEVADA  
 BILL CASSIDY, LOUISIANA  
 MIKE ROUNDS, SOUTH DAKOTA  
 THOM TILLIS, NORTH CAROLINA  
 DAN SULLIVAN, ALASKA

## United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
 WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 9, 2017

JON TESTER, MONTANA  
 RANKING MEMBER  
 PATTY MURPHY, WASHINGTON  
 BERNARD SANDERS, VERMONT  
 SHEPARD BROWN, OHIO  
 RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, CONNECTICUT  
 MAZIE HIRONO, HAWAII  
 JOE MANCHINI III, WEST VIRGINIA

The Honorable Michael Enzi  
 Chairman  
 The Honorable Bernard Sanders  
 Ranking Member  
 Committee on the Budget  
 624 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
 United States Senate  
 Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Enzi and Ranking Member Sanders:

Pursuant to section 301(d) of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974, it is my pleasure as the Chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs (hereinafter, "Committee") to submit this letter to the Committee on the Budget on the fiscal year 2018 (hereinafter, "FY18") budget and the fiscal year 2019 (hereinafter, "FY19") advance appropriations budget request for Function 700 (Veterans' Benefits and Services) programs.

Because the Committee has not received the President's budget request, I am limited in the detail I can provide for the FY18 budget and FY19 advance appropriation budget request. I will limit my comments to general observations and highlight areas that I believe merit focus by the Committee on the Budget.

### DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS Care in the Community Program

As I have stressed publicly, a top focus this Congress must be to make health care more accessible to veterans, including through the use of Department of Veterans Affairs (hereinafter, "VA") care and care in the community. In part, this will require continued focus on non-VA care in VA's budget, as well as legislative reforms of the array of care in the community programs. In that regard, while I am pleased to see the Veterans Health Administration (hereinafter, "VHA") embracing care in the community, we owe it to veterans to ensure that the decision to receive care in the community be at the veteran's choice. Unfortunately, where a veteran receives care is still largely VHA's choice.

Going forward, there should be no "litmus test" to be eligible for care in the community. Criteria for eligibility should be whether the veteran is enrolled in VHA for care, not whether an appointment within the VA cannot be provided within 30 days or the veteran lives more than 40 miles from a VA facility. Using 30 days and 40 miles as eligibility criteria in the Veterans

Chairman Enzi and Ranking Member Sanders  
 March 9, 2017  
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Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014, was a temporary fix at a time of crisis to ensure veterans received care. Also, the community network VHA uses to provide that care should be set up through a national contract or contracts, in order to ensure a provider network is available across the country. A national contract or contracts would allow VHA to monitor and report on the type of care provided in the community. Individual contracts executed at the local VA medical center level should only be entered into if the services or care is not available through the national contract or contracts.

It is not my intent to privatize VHA but rather enable VHA to leverage all means available to treat veterans. Veterans should receive the care they have earned and deserve with a provider of their choosing. I am interested in empowering VHA by making health care more available to veterans through care in both the private sector and VA. I look forward to working with the Committee on the Budget and the Administration to ensure community care continues to be available to veterans.

#### **VA Appeals Reform**

To address the unacceptable delays that veterans and their families face during the disability claims appeal process, a number of proposals were put forward last Congress, including legislation to authorize a pilot program on fully-developed appeals and legislation to comprehensively overhaul the appeals system. Although Congress took initial steps to address the appeals backlog – such as emphasizing the use of video hearings by the Board of Veterans' Appeals -- VA's appeals process must continue to be an area of focus during the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress.

In determining the best path forward, it is important to consider that the comprehensive appeals reform proposal would apply to new appeals received after the reforms are in place and the 460,000 appeals now waiting to be resolved would be processed under the current structure. VA previously acknowledged that, if that reform proposal were to be adopted without a significant infusion of new resources, VA would expect to be administering a new appeals system side-by-side with the current appeals system for nearly three decades while VA completely works through the existing 460,000 appeals. As the veterans service organizations who co-author the Independent Budget have stressed, "[u]ntil these pending appeals are properly resolved, no new appeals structure or system can be expected to be successful."

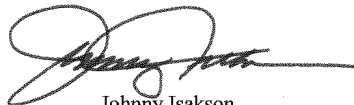
That is why we must ensure that VA has a robust plan for providing answers to those who are already waiting and for effectively implementing any legislative changes, along with thorough estimates of the resources that would be required to do both simultaneously. That, in turn, would allow Congress to ensure that any legislative reforms of the appeals system are coupled with an appropriate funding level. With that in mind, I look forward to working with the Committee on the Budget, all of our colleagues, VA, and stakeholders to ensure that the necessary pieces are in place to make reform efforts as effective as possible.

Chairman Enzi and Ranking Member Sanders  
March 9, 2017  
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**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Thank you for your consideration of my views on the programs and services for our nation's veterans. VA has numerous challenges which Congress, VA, and stakeholders must work collectively to address. I look forward to working with the Committee on the Budget and all of our colleagues to help improve and modernize the system of benefits and services for veterans, their families, and their survivors.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Johnny Isakson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Johnny Isakson  
Chairman

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

JOHNNY ISAKSON, Georgia, *Chairman*

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DAN SULLIVAN, Alaska	JOE MANCHIN III, West Virginia

THOMAS G. BOWMAN, *Staff Director*<sup>1</sup>

ROBERT J. HENKE, *Staff Director*<sup>2</sup>

TONY MCCLAIN, *Democratic Staff Director*

<sup>1</sup>Thomas G. Bowman served as Committee majority Staff Director through September 5, 2017, after being confirmed as Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs on August 3, 2017.

<sup>2</sup>Robert J. Henke became the Committee majority Staff Director on September 6, 2017.

